

**Use the 5-Step Process to Get What You Want Out of Life** It seems to me that the personal evolutionary process—the looping I described in the last chapter—takes place in five distinct steps. If you can do those five things well, you will almost certainly be successful. Here they are in a nutshell:

1. Have clear goals.
  2. Identify and don't tolerate the problems that stand in the way of your achieving those goals.
  3. Accurately diagnose the problems to get at their root causes.
  4. Design plans that will get you around them.
  5. Do what's necessary to push these designs through to results.
- Together, these five steps make up a loop, like the one on the facing page. Let's look at this process more granularly.

**First you have to pick what you are going after—your goals.** Your choice of goals will determine your direction. As you move toward them, you will encounter problems. Some of those problems will bring you up against your own weaknesses. How you react to the pain that causes is up to you.

If you want to reach your goals, you must be calm and analytical so that you can accurately diagnose your problems, design a plan that will get you around them, and do what's necessary to push through to results. Then you will look at the new results you achieve and go through the process again. To evolve quickly, you will have to do this fast and continuously, setting your goals successively higher.





**You will need to do all five steps well to be successful and you must do them one at a time and in order.** For example, when setting goals, just set goals. Don't think about how you will achieve them or what you will do if something goes wrong. When you are diagnosing problems, don't think about how you will solve them—just diagnose them. Blurring the steps leads to suboptimal outcomes because it interferes with uncovering the true problems. The process is iterative: Doing each step thoroughly will provide you with the information you need to move on to the next step and do it well. It is essential that you approach this process in a clearheaded, rational way, looking down on yourself from a higher level and **being ruthlessly honest**. If your emotions are getting the better of you, step back and take time out until you can reflect clearly. If necessary, seek guidance from calm, thoughtful people.

To help you stay centered and effective, pretend that your life is a martial art or a game, the object of which is to get around a challenge and reach a goal. Once you accept its rules, you'll get used to the discomfort that comes with the constant frustration. **You will never handle everything perfectly: Mistakes are inevitable and it's important to recognize and accept this fact of life.**

The good news is that every mistake you make can teach you something, so there's no end to learning. You'll soon realize that excuses like "that's not easy" or "it doesn't seem fair" or even "I can't do that" are of no value and that it pays to push through. So what if you don't have all the skills you need to succeed? Don't worry about it because that's true for everyone. You just have to know when they are needed and where you can go to get them.





With practice, you will eventually play this game with a calm unstoppable centeredness in the face of adversity. Your ability to get what you want will thrill you.

**Now let's look at how to approach each of the five steps. 2.1**

Have clear goals.

a. **Prioritize:** While you can have virtually anything you want, you can't have everything you want. Life is like a giant smorgasbord with more delicious alternatives than you can ever hope to taste. Choosing a goal often means rejecting some things you want in order to get other things that you want or need even more. Some people fail at this point, before they've even started. Afraid to reject a good alternative for a better one, they try to pursue too many goals at once, achieving few or none of them. Don't get discouraged and don't let yourself be paralyzed by all the choices. You can have much more than what you need to be happy. Make your choice and get on with it.

b. **Don't confuse goals with desires.** A proper goal is something that you really need to achieve. Desires are things that you want that can prevent you from reaching your goals. Typically, desires are first-order consequences. For example, your goal might be physical fitness, while your desire is to eat good-tasting but unhealthy food. Don't get me wrong, if you want to be a couch potato, that's fine with me. You can pursue whatever goals you want. But if you don't want to be a couch potato, then you better not open that bag of chips.

c. **Decide what you really want in life by reconciling your goals and your desires.** Take passion, for example. Without passion, life



would be dull; you wouldn't want to live without it. But what's key is what you do with your passion. Do you let it consume you and drive you to irrational acts, or do you harness it to motivate and drive you while you pursue your real goals? What will ultimately fulfill you are things that feel right at both levels, as both desires and goals.

d. Don't mistake the trappings of success for success itself. Achievement orientation is important, but people who obsess over a \$1,200 pair of shoes or a fancy car are very rarely happy because they don't know what it is that they really want and hence what will satisfy them.

e. Never rule out a goal because you think it's unattainable. Be audacious. There is always a best possible path. Your job is to find it and have the courage to follow it. What you think is attainable is just a function of what you know at the moment. Once you start your pursuit you will learn a lot, especially if you triangulate with others; paths you never saw before will emerge. Of course there are some impossibilities or near-impossibilities, such as playing center on a professional basketball team if you're short, or running a four-minute mile at age seventy.

f. Remember that great expectations create great capabilities. If you limit your goals to what you know you can achieve, you are setting the bar way too low.

g. Almost nothing can stop you from succeeding if you have a) flexibility and b) self-accountability. Flexibility is what allows you to accept what reality (or knowledgeable people) teaches you; self-accountability is essential because if you really believe that failing





to achieve a goal is your personal failure, you will see your failing to achieve it as indicative that you haven't been creative or flexible or determined enough to do what it takes. And you will be that much more motivated to find the way.

h. Knowing how to deal well with your setbacks is as important as knowing how to move forward. Sometimes you know that you are going over a waterfall and there is no way to avoid it. Life will throw you such challenges, some of which will seem devastating at the time. In bad times, your goal might be to keep what you have, to minimize your rate of loss, or simply to deal with a loss that is irrevocable. Your mission is to always make the best possible choices, knowing that you will be rewarded if you do.

## 2.2 Identify and don't tolerate problems.

a. View painful problems as potential improvements that are screaming at you. Though it won't feel that way at first, each and every problem you encounter is an opportunity; for that reason, it is essential that you bring them to the surface. Most people don't like to do this, especially if it exposes their own weaknesses or the weaknesses of someone they care about, but successful people know they have to.

b. Don't avoid confronting problems because they are rooted in harsh realities that are unpleasant to look at. Thinking about problems that are difficult to solve may make you anxious, but not thinking about them (and hence not dealing with them) should make you more anxious still. When a problem stems from your own lack of talent or skill, most people feel shame. Get over it. I cannot emphasize this enough: Acknowledging your weaknesses





is not the same as surrendering to them. It's the first step toward overcoming them. The pains you are feeling are “growing pains” that will test your character and reward you as you push through them.

c. Be specific in identifying your problems. You need to be precise, because different problems have different solutions. If a problem is due to inadequate skill, additional training may be called for; if it arises from an innate weakness, you may need to seek assistance from someone else or change the role you play. In other words, if you're bad at accounting, hire an accountant. If a problem stems from someone else's weaknesses, replace them with someone who is strong where it's needed. That's just the way it is.

d. Don't mistake a cause of a problem with the real problem. “I can't get enough sleep” is not a problem; it is a potential cause (or perhaps the result) of a problem. To clarify your thinking, try to identify the bad outcome first; e.g., “I am performing poorly in my job.” Not sleeping enough may be the cause of that problem, or the cause may be something else—but in order to determine that, you need to know exactly what the problem is.

e. Distinguish big problems from small ones. You only have so much time and energy; make sure you are investing them in exploring the problems that, if fixed, will yield you the biggest returns. But at the same time, make sure you spend enough time with the small problems to make sure they're not symptoms of larger ones.



f. Once you identify a problem, don't tolerate it. Tolerating a problem has the same consequences as failing to identify it. Whether you tolerate it because you believe it cannot be solved, because you don't care enough to solve it, or because you can't muster enough of whatever it takes to solve it, if you don't have the will to succeed, then your situation is hopeless. You need to develop a fierce intolerance of badness of any kind, regardless of its severity.

### 2.3 Diagnose problems to get at their root causes.

a. Focus on the "what is" before deciding "what to do about it." It is a common mistake to move in a nanosecond from identifying a tough problem to proposing a solution for it. Strategic thinking requires both diagnosis and design. A good diagnosis typically takes between fifteen minutes and an hour, depending on how well it's done and how complex the issue is. It involves speaking with the relevant people and looking at the evidence together to determine the root causes. Like principles, root causes manifest themselves over and over again in seemingly different situations. Finding them and dealing with them pays dividends again and again.

b. Distinguish proximate causes from root causes. Proximate causes are typically the actions (or lack of actions) that lead to problems, so they are described with verbs (I missed the train because I didn't check the train schedule). Root causes run much deeper and they are typically described with adjectives (I didn't check the train schedule because I am forgetful). You can only truly solve your problems by removing their root causes, and to do that, you must distinguish the symptoms from the disease.



c. Recognize that knowing what someone (including you) is like will tell you what you can expect from them. You will have to get over your reluctance to assess what people are like if you want to surround yourself with people who have the qualities you need. That goes for yourself too. People almost always find it difficult to identify and accept their own mistakes and weaknesses. Sometimes it's because they're blind to them, but more often it's because their egos get in the way. Most likely your associates are equally reluctant to point out your mistakes, because they don't want to hurt you. You all need to get over this. More than anything else, what differentiates people who live up to their potential from those who don't is their willingness to look at themselves and others objectively and understand the root causes standing in their way.

## 2.4 Design a plan.

a. Go back before you go forward. Replay the story of where you have been (or what you have done) that led up to where you are now, and then visualize what you and others must do in the future so you will reach your goals.

b. Think about your problem as a set of outcomes produced by a machine. Practice higher-level thinking by looking down on your machine and thinking about how it can be changed to produce better outcomes.

c. Remember that there are typically many paths to achieving your goals. You only need to find one that works.

d. Think of your plan as being like a movie script in that you visualize who will do what through time. Sketch out the plan





broadly at first (e.g., “hire great people”) and then refine it. You should go from the big picture and drill down to specific tasks and estimated time lines (e.g., “In the next two weeks, choose the headhunters who will find those great people”). The real-world issues of costs, time, and personnel will undoubtedly surface as you do this, and that will lead you to further refine your design until all the gears in the machine are meshing smoothly.

e. Write down your plan for everyone to see and to measure your progress against. This includes all the granular details about who needs to do what tasks and when. The tasks, the narrative, and the goals are different, so don’t mix them up. Remember, the tasks are what connect the narrative to your goals.

f. Recognize that it doesn’t take a lot of time to design a good plan. A plan can be sketched out and refined in just hours or spread out over days or weeks. But the process is essential because it determines what you will have to do to be effective. Too many people make the mistake of spending virtually no time on designing because they are preoccupied with execution. Remember: Designing precedes doing!

## 2.5 Push through to completion.

a. Great planners who don’t execute their plans go nowhere. You need to push through and that requires self-discipline to follow your script. It’s important to remember the connections between your tasks and the goals that they are meant to achieve. When you feel yourself losing sight of that, stop and ask yourself “why?” Lose sight of the why and you will surely lose sight of your goals.



b. Good work habits are vastly underrated. People who push through successfully have to-do lists that are reasonably prioritized, and they make certain each item is ticked off in order.

c. Establish clear metrics to make certain that you are following your plan. Ideally, someone other than you should be objectively measuring and reporting on your progress. If you're not hitting your targets, that's another problem that needs to be diagnosed and solved. There are many successful, creative people who aren't good at execution. They succeed because they forge symbiotic relationships with highly reliable task-doers. That's all there is to it!

**Remember that all 5 Steps proceed from your values. Your values determine what you want, i.e., your goals. Also keep in mind that the 5 Steps are iterative.**

When you complete one step, you will have acquired information that will most likely lead you to modify the other steps. When you've completed all five, you'll start again with a new goal. If the process is working, your goals will change more slowly than your designs, which will change more slowly than your tasks. One last important point: You will need to synthesize and shape well. The first three steps—setting goals, identifying problems, and then diagnosing them—are synthesizing (by which I mean knowing where you want to go and what's really going on). Designing solutions and making sure that the designs are implemented are shaping.

2.6 Remember that weaknesses don't matter if you find solutions. You almost certainly can't do all these steps well, because each



requires different types of thinking and virtually nobody can think well in all these ways. For example, goal setting (such as determining what you want your life to be) requires you to be good at higher-level thinking like visualization and prioritization. Identifying and not tolerating problems requires you to be perceptive and good at synthesis and maintaining high standards; diagnosis requires you to be logical, able to see multiple possibilities, and willing to have hard conversations with others; designing requires visualization and practicality; doing what you set out to do requires self-discipline, good work habits, and a results orientation. Who do you know who has all those qualities? Probably no one.

Yet doing all 5 Steps well is required for being really successful. So what do you do? First and foremost, have humility so you can get what you need from others! Everyone has weaknesses. They are generally revealed in the patterns of mistakes they make. Knowing what your weaknesses are and staring hard at them is the first step on the path to success.

a. Look at the patterns of your mistakes and identify at which step in the 5-Step Process you typically fail. Ask others for their input too, as nobody can be fully objective about themselves.

b. Everyone has at least one big thing that stands in the way of their success; find yours and deal with it. Write down what your one big thing is (such as identifying problems, designing solutions, pushing through to results) and why it exists (your emotions trip you up, you can't visualize adequate possibilities). While you and most people probably have more than one major impediment, if you can remove or get around that one really big





one, you will hugely improve your life. If you work on it, you will almost certainly be able to deal successfully with your one big thing. You can either fix it or you can get the help of others to deal with it well.

There are two paths to success:

- 1) to have what you need yourself or
- 2) to get it from others. The second path requires you to have humility. Humility is as important, or even more important, as having the strengths yourself. Having both is best. On the following page is a template that some people find helpful.

2.7 Understand your own and others' mental maps and humility. Some people are good at knowing what to do on their own; they have good mental maps. Maybe they acquired them from being taught; maybe they were blessed with an especially large dose of common sense. Whatever the case, they have more answers inside themselves than others do. Similarly, some people are more humble and open-minded than others. Humility can be even more valuable than having good mental maps if it leads you to seek out better answers than you could come up with on your own. Having both open-mindedness and good mental maps is most powerful of all. To convey this simple concept, imagine rating from one to ten how good someone's mental map is (in other words, what they know) on the Y-axis and how humble/open-minded they are on the X-axis, as shown on the opposite page.

Everyone starts out in the lower left area, with poor mental maps and little open-mindedness, and most people remain tragically





and arrogantly stuck in that position. You can improve by either going up on the mental-maps axis (by learning how to do things better) or out on the open-mindedness axis. Either will provide you with better knowledge of what to do. If you have good mental maps and low open-mindedness, that will be good but not great. You will still miss a lot that is of value. Similarly, if you have high open-mindedness but bad mental maps, you will probably have challenges picking the right people and points of view to follow. The person who has good mental maps and a lot of open-mindedness will always beat out the person who doesn't have both. Now take a minute to think about your path to becoming more effective. Where would you place yourself on this chart? Ask others where they'd place you. Once you understand what you're missing and gain open-mindedness that will allow you to get help from others, you'll see that there's virtually nothing you can't accomplish. Most people fail to do this most of the time. In the next chapters, I'll explore why and how to rectify that.

